

Simon's Blog II – Wien – Budapest

We Railjet our way to Vienna with a somewhat brisk and hectic start to what was in the end a good day. 8.50 at the Hauptbahnhof Innsbruck to get our tickets, 100+ musicians each with a suitcase, some carrying instruments, oh boy, this is going to be fun ... The train is full, not only with the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, but also with normal Joes going about their days and probably not best pleased that the train is stormed by a herd of musicians who seem, mostly, to be in the wrong part of the train. I grab the very first seat I can, which is not as easily done as it sounds, opposite poor Ewa Grzywna-Groblewska who instantly buries her head in a book on psychology. There's a message there somewhere! Ambros seems to have his plate full with people who don't know how to find their way around a train ...

We plod along to Vienna, the Jass crowd, Paul Westermayer, Herbie Kistler, Karl Fässler and Michel Willi, are hard at it, as they have been on tours for years, Ewa busy with psychology. The plan is that we, on arrival in Vienna, walk to the hotel, and take in a proper Wienerschnitzel on the way, and having made it to Vienna we do exactly that. We have a recommendation from Ian Bousfield, the English virtuoso trombonist, who was for many years Principal Trombone of the Vienna Philharmonic and is now teacher of Marco Rodrigues, for a place called «Plachuttas» which is opposite the Opernhaus and a go to for the musicians of that orchestra. So we make it a go to for us. As do many of our colleagues who arrive in dribs and drabs, and the Schnitzel is absolutely delicious ...

We are playing tonight in the Konzerthaus, which was constructed as an opposite pole to the Musikvereinsaal, over a period of 20 years, it being opened in 1913, a last Habsburgian gasp of municipal munificence I suppose. Although at first it is not instantly identifiable with the Tonhalle it is from the design table of the very same design company, Fellner und Helmer. Imposing from the outside, delightfully «fin de siecle» art nouveau style inside, it was conceived as a multi-purpose building, to be accessible to a broader public than the «society set» who frequented, at the time at least, the Vereinsaal. In the first place, it actually has 3 halls which can be used simultaneously. The main hall looks deceptively large from my seat on stage but in fact seats «only» 1865, so actually it isn't that much larger than the Tonhalle.

We are, as usual, resident in the «Hotel am Konzerthaus», which, I am sure, exists largely to service the orchestras performing at the Konzerthaus, is entirely unsuited to the servicing of orchestras ... Small lifts and a very small lobby make the arrival of 100+ musicians an uncomfortable experience and the individual check-in takes forever. We gain access sooner or later to our rooms and I figure probably all are asleep, as am I, in a very short time. A seating rehearsal of 45 minutes, which focuses almost entirely on the Bartók follows, I can't remember if we even play a note of the Tchaikovsky. A full hall, and the Bartók, the trickiest piece on the programme, goes well, and is «politely» received, Tchaikovsky 5 brings the house down. Afterwards, we make our way to the famous «Gmoakeller» conveniently close to both the hall and the hotel. Some beer, some wine, small food and small talk complete the evening. I do enjoy the simple «Kollegialität» which we share with one another, the friendships which deepen, the casual, almost, closeness which we develop in a surprisingly close time, and often to a surprising depth. Bed on time, as tomorrow will follow the obligatory, for every tour, 4 hour bus journey, for tomorrow we head to Budapest.

The start is actually fairly generous at 9.30, but the weather is decidedly chill between Vienna and Budapest. The fog is thick, the fields crisp with snow and frost, and quickly the signposting is that most indecipherable of tongues, Hungarian. I spend half the journey in combination with violist Andrea Wennberg, on the subjects of natural healing, yoga, Reiki, NLP, hypnosis and the treatment of anxiety and depression with these methods ... As I said, I like touring as I find myself outside my usual circle of colleagues and discussing in more depth on all sorts of subjects which otherwise I might never touch ... Our young lady from the office, the lovely Géraldine Camenisch, is given, before we depart, by the bus driver, the dubious task of announcing to us that the bus toilet is only to be used «lightly» and we are not to wash our hands as it is «Winterbetrieb», whatever that means and however that is to be interpreted!! I wonder if she ever imagined being given such odious tasks when she signed her contract – this is high art after all!!

We arrive, actually ahead of time, in Budapest, which gives us time to eat, but little else. No time for sightseeing, just food and 2 hours sleep, I sleep dangerously long, waking just 15 minutes before the bus departure, but still managing to shower ... The hall is about 30 minutes away and is one of 2 symphonic halls in the city. It is, so it seems to me, a carbon copy of the KKL in Luzern and Symphony Hall in Birmingham, both of which I know well. The «National Béla Bartók Concerthall» was designed acoustically by the firm of Russell Johnson, so I guess what Fellner und Helmer were doing at the end of the 19th century, replicating halls, at least around Europe, is being done in the 21st century by Russell Johnson. Acoustically, it is of course similar to Luzern and Birmingham but things feel «a long way away» and the Bartók seems, to my ears at least, to be received somewhat luke-warmly, which is odd, as it is «their» piece. Maybe that is why – we played it fine, but you just never know ... The Tchaikovsky 5 is rapturously received by the sold out hall, so I suppose we were good enough. The halls have, up until now, all been sold out, which speaks well for us, and pleases us greatly. It is the greatest motivation imaginable to step on to a stage in front of an expectant full hall.

We are met after the concert by Balaczs Nemes who escorts us past the other concert hall in the city, where I notice the name of Béla Bartók largely emblazoned. Balaczs has been for many years Principal Trumpet of the Hessische Rundfunk Orchester in Frankfurt, and will soon assume the same position at the Opernhaus in Zürich, we spend a lovely time drinking fine Hungarian wine and enjoying the ambiance of the St. Andrea Wine and Sky Bar! And so ends a tremendous evening!!